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Council, school board hopefuls discuss views

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RIALTO - The candidates for City Council and school board assembled for the first time Monday night for a forum at the Woman's Club of Rialto.

Moderated by former Councilwoman Lynn Hirtz, the debate lacked both surprises and passionate conflict, even when touchy issues like last year's attempt to disband the city Police Department came up.

The council race pits two incumbents, Deborah Robertson and Joe Sampson, against four challengers: Assemblyman Joe Baca Jr., retired railroad employee Clifford Friedeck, grocery manager John Sanchez and Planning Commissioner Mark Ferretiz.

Baca emphasized the Police Department's needs in his opening remarks. He pointed out that he protested the council's vote to eliminate the department. The two incumbent council members voted to break up the department and contract out to the county Sheriff's Department, but the council later backed off that decision.

Baca and the two incumbents also disagreed about how to recover funds to clean up perchlorate - a main ingredient in products such as rocket fuel, explosives and fireworks - in the city's groundwater.

Sampson and Robertson said they support the city's litigation against the suspected polluters, while Baca said it is better to work cooperatively with other government entities and not to spend so much money on attorneys.

Robertson and Sampson said that without litigation the city would not be able to recover the money it needs.

Baca also said the city should consider blending uncontaminated water with water that contains perchlorate in order to dilute the contamination and reduce its perchlorate levels.

Sampson, Robertson and Ferretiz said they think the city's utility-users tax is necessary until the city has a larger tax base. Robertson said the tax provides 25 percent of the city's funding and that eliminating it could lead to significant cuts in city services.

Sanchez said he opposes the tax. Baca and Friedeck said the city should consider making changes to it.

Three of the four candidates for school board were at the forum. Incumbent Joanne Gilbert, psychologist John Kazalunas and Corey Jackson, district representative for Assemblywoman Gloria Negrete McLeod, D-Montclair, were at the forum. Alfonso Garcia Jr. was absent.

Kazalunas presented himself as the candidate for change, agreeing with the premise of a question that administrators are often paid too much and that teachers are forced to perform too many administrative tasks.

Gilbert defended the school district and many of its current practices, including paying administrators high salaries. She also said the district's test scores are often deflated because so many of its students are not fluent English speakers.

Jackson and Kazalunas said students often are not learning as much as they should. Jackson said many college students in California have to take remedial classes.

Jackson, 24, said he also wants young people to be proud of Rialto and to want to stay in the city and improve the community.

Steve Wolfe of Rialto, a trucking-company inspector, said some of the issues he cares about were not addressed.

"I don't think that I heard any real infrastructure ideas," he said, emphasizing that the city's roads need attention.

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